

- [About](#)
- [Disclaimer](#)
- [I AM Navy Medicine](#)
- RSS :
- [Posts](#)
- [Comments](#)

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- [Home](#)
 - [Disclaimer](#)
 - [Navy Medicine WebSite](#)
- [About](#)
 - [Leadership](#)
 - [Readiness](#)
 - [Health](#)
 - [Partnerships](#)
- [Inside Navy Medicine](#)
 - [Dental Corps](#)
 - [Hospital Corps](#)
 - [Medical Corps](#)
 - [Medical Service Corps](#)
 - [Nurse Corps](#)
 - [Civilians](#)
 - [Reserves](#)
- [Navy Medicine Community](#)
 - [Sailors](#)
 - [Marines](#)
 - [Families](#)
 - [Outreach](#)
- [Navy Medicine Features](#)
 - [I am Navy Medicine](#)
 - [A Look Back](#)
 - [In Focus](#)
 - [Scrubbing In](#)

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Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Samuel Johnson running on the beach with the American flag in hand Virginia Beach, Va. (Courtesy photo via Military Times)

Navy Environmental and Preventive Medicine Unit Two (NEPMU-2) Preventive Medicine Technician Hospital Corpsman 1st Class Samuel Johnson is a 2016 recipient of the Military Times Service Member of the Year Award.

In July, before Congress adjourns for its summer recess, Johnson, along with fellow winners of the Military Times Service Member of the Year Awards from the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force, and Coast Guard, will visit Capitol Hill as part of a week-long trip to the District of Columbia for workshops with policymakers and a formal awards ceremony on Capitol Hill.

Johnson received the award that includes a scholarship, in large part for his work with Team Red, White and Blue (RWB).

Recently featured on National Public Radio in a series of stories about the impact of war, RWB is a fitness club that connects veterans and civilians through running, with over 83,000 members from 175 chapters nationwide.

As founder of the Hampton Roads Chapter, Johnson dedicated much of his off-duty time developing the program.

His endeavors with this organization were recognized by the Navy Times when they evaluated Johnson, along with 103 other candidates, for this award. The Sightline Media Group, through the marketing and editorial staff of the Navy Times, reviewed nominees based on selection criteria that included a high level of professionalism, concern for fellow service members, and a commitment to community service.

This “beyond the call of duty” ethos is something that Johnson values and personifies.

“I’m really proud of what HM1 Johnson has done,” OIC of NEPMU-2 Cmdr. Jennifer Espiritu said. “As part of the Navy medicine enterprise, he talks the talk and walks the walk when it comes to health, wellness, and fitness, as well as building mental and physical resilience and looking out for one another.”

Johnson discovered RWB after returning from a difficult deployment to Afghanistan.

“Even though I was still part of the Navy and the military, emotionally, something was missing,” Johnson said.

Compelled by a friend to give it a try, what began as a four-mile run with members of the Richmond chapter, ultimately led Johnson to found a new chapter in Hampton Roads.

“I don’t think I can really take credit for working on an organization to which I am so indebted for getting my life back on track,” Johnson said.

Most of the roughly 1,300 Hampton Roads members are Post-9/11 veterans, but there are several Korean War veterans, civilians, and active duty service members.

“Sports are the vehicle for shared experience. The group provides accountability because it would be easier to stay home, alone, on the couch, but not better,” Johnson said. “It isn’t about sympathy for the others, but empathy that comes from a shared experience and underlying understanding.”

The group’s mission statement espouses a simple equation: “Enrichment = Health + People + Purpose.” For a Navy corpsman, this principle resonates.



(Courtesy photo via Military Times)

“He and my doctor, another RWB member, encouraged me to stay active throughout my pregnancy, and I’m convinced me and my baby are healthier because of those efforts,” Espiritu said.

If given the opportunity to speak with members of Congress, his message would be to remind them about the importance of not short-changing veterans when it comes to healthcare.

In the interim, Johnson will continue to help bridge this gap, putting his training as a Navy corpsman to use to benefit veterans and civilians in his community through RWB.

“When I get notified about a new member, I send a greeting and I ask them when and where I’m going to see them,” Johnson said. “I would like to think that others in this group may have felt the same way I did at one point, and by making them feel like they belong, and holding them accountable, we may help bring them back from the brink.”

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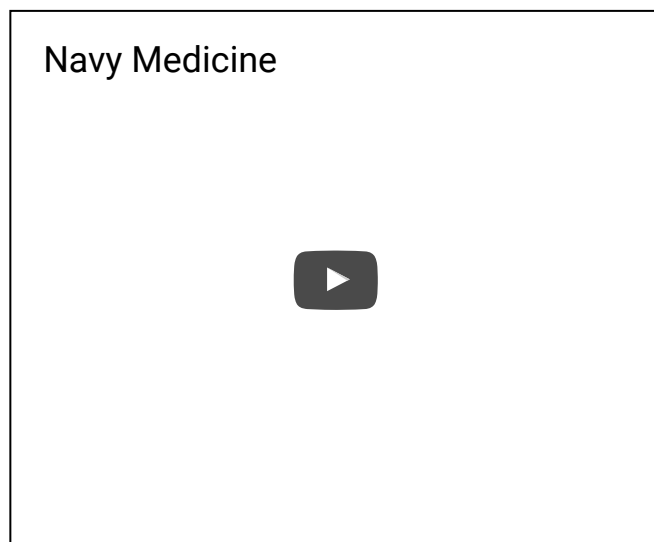
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